

1: Roth--15-16

(No date) 1890

Tasmanians

116, 481, 283, 516

"Climbing Trees. --We have some good accounts of the manner in which the natives used to climb trees. Mr. Thirkell (Papers, etc. Roy. Soc. Tas. Aug. 1873) thus describes how this was accomplished. 'The mode of climbing trees was to get a grass band [16] twisted, put it round the tree, and hold the two ends in one hand, and then with a sharp flint stone they would chip the bark downwards and make a notch for the big toe, then change hands and do the same on the other side. '"

"Backhouse's description is more detailed. 'The climbing of the lofty, smooth-trunked gum trees, by the women, to obtain opossums, which lodge in the hollows of decayed' branches, is one of the most remarkable feats I ever witnessed. This is effected without making any holes for the thumbs or great toes, as is common among the natives of New South Wales, except where the bark is rough and loose, at the base of the tree. In this a few notches are cut by means of a sharp flint or hatchet; the latter being preferred. A rope, twice as long as is necessary to encompass the tree, is then thrown around it. In former times this was made of tough grass, or strips of kangaroo-skin, but one of hemp is more generally used. The left hand is firmly twisted into one end of the rope, the middle of which is tightly grasped by the right, the hatchet is placed on the bare, closely-cropped head, and the feet are placed against the tree: a step or two is then advanced, and the body, at the same time, is brought into a posture so nearly exact as to admit the rope, by a compound motion, to be slackened, and at the same moment hitched a little further up the tree. By this means a woman will ascend a lofty tree, with a smooth thunk, almost as quickly as a man would go up a ladder. Should a piece of loose bark impede the ascent of the rope, the portion of rope held in the right hand is taken between the teeth, or swung behind the right leg and caught between the great and the fore toe and fixed against the tree. One hand is thus freed, to take the hatchet from the head, and with it to dislodge the loose bark. On arriving at a large limb, the middle of the rope is also secured in the left hand, and the loose end is thrown over the limb by the

right hand, by which also the end is caught, and the middle grasped, till the left hand is cleared. This is then wrapped into the middle of the rope, and the feet are brought up to the wrinkles of the bark, which exist below the large limbs. One end of the rope is then pulled downward, and this causes the other to ascend, so that, by an effort of the feet, the body is turned on the upper side of the limb of the tree. In descending, the woman places one arm on each side of the limb of the tree, and swings the rope with one hand till she catches it with the other; she then turns off the limb, and swings underneath it, till she succeeds in steadying herself with her feet against the trunk, around which she then throws the loose end [17] of the rope. Having secured this, she lets go the portion by which she was suspended under the limb, and descends in the manner in which she ascended. Although this is done with ease by women in vigour, one who had been out of health, but seemed recovered, could not get many steps off the ground, so that not only skill, but a considerable measure of strength, appears necessary to ascend the gigantic gum-trees.' Widowson's account (p. 190), on the other hand, describes a method of climbing trees which is accomplished without the use of the rope: 'They are extremely expert in climbing, and can reach the top of the largest forest trees, without the aid of branches: they effect this by means of a small sharp flint, which they clasp tightly in the ball of their four fingers, and, having cut a notch out of the bark, they

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easily ascend, with the large toe of each foot in one notch, and their curiously manufactured hatchet in the other. ' (1)"

"1. It has been said that the notches cut in the trees were about $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet apart."

"Lloyd mentions (p. 113) coming unawares across a group of natives seated in tailor-fashion, occupied in making spears. Bligh states (p. 51), 'They talked to us sitting on their heels, with their knees close into their armpits;' and Péron repeats (pp. 226 and 251) that the natives squatted on their heels. With regard to the women, La Billardiére mentions (II. pp. 47-48), 'We observed with surprise, the singular posture of the women, when they sit on the ground. . . . It appears to be a point of decorum with these ladies, as they sit with their knees asunder, to cover with one foot what modesty bids them conceal. '"

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Tamanians

"Ross in describing an aboriginal meal which he witnessed, says, 'These aborigines, I found, were quite...classical in [18] adopting the Roman method of reclining at meals, lying round their fire, resting on one elbow and holding the half-roasted leg of an opossum, eating, in the other. '"

"According to Anderson (Cook's Sec. Voy. Bk. I. ch. vi.), 'The posture of which they seem fondest is to stand with one side forward, or the upper part of the body gently reclined, and one hand grasping (across the back) the opposite arm, which hangs down by the projecting side,' which account of their peculiar mode of holding the arms is corroborated by La Billardière (II. p. 49) in the following: 'The men followed with a grave pace, each carrying his hands resting one against the other upon his loins; or sometimes the left hand passing behind the back, and grasping the right arm about the middle.'"

"This holding of the upper limbs in this peculiar fashion may perhaps have something to do in connection with their method of carrying their spears by their toes so as to appear quite unarmed, for we read (Meredith, p. 195), 'The aborigines, when they wished to appear unarmed, had a habit of walking without any weapon in their hands, but very adroitly trailing their spears, which they held fast by their toes, along the ground after them, to be picked up at any moment they were required;' and Davies says, 'If the ground is smooth upon which they are walking, as a beach for instance, they have a habit of trailing their spears after them, the point held in some manner between their great toe and that next it; this seems to be that they may have their waddy ready to heave at any small object that may appear. The spear is transferred from the foot to the hand in an instant.' It would appear that this stealthy carrying of arms is a warlike precaution, for Calder (pp. 21-22) says: 'The Tasmanian aboriginal, in advancing on a victim whom he meant to kill, treacherously approached . . . with his hands clasped and resting on the top of his head, a favourite posture of the black; . . . but all the time he was dragging a spear behind him, held between his toes, in a manner that must have taken long to acquire. Then by a motion as unexpected as it was rapid, it was transferred to the hand, and the victim pierced before he could lift a hand or stir a step.' The first white man, George Munday, who was killed by an aborigine, fell a victim to this practice; for, as Knopwood relates (p. 53), 'the native had a spear concealed, and held by his toes, and as Munday turned from him, he caught up his spear and threw it at him.'"

"West states (pp. 81-2) that the member of the tribe who had committed an offence 'had to stand while a certain number of spear were thrown at him,' but that, 'the keenness of his eye, and agility of his motions, usually enabled him to escape a fatal wound,' and Calder (p. 60) describes similar agility when alluding to the inter-tribal wars in which they engaged. These fights, he says, 'often lasted for hours, but such was the dexterity of the savage in evading the spears of his adversaries that they seldom struck him. Without moving an inch from his post, he would avoid a discharge of three or four well-directed spears sent at him at the same instant. By a contortion of his body, a movement of his head to the right or left, or raising his leg or arm, he seldom failed escaping them all, any one of which would have transfixed the less agile European with the most perfect certainty.'"

"Their quickness is further vouched for by an account of Péron (p. 221) during one of the excursions, 'We arrived at a small creek, at the end of which was a pretty valley. . . . We had hardly set foot ashore before two aborigines showed themselves at the top of a hillock precipitous almost to the top. At the signs of friendship we made them, one of them threw himself, rather than descended, from the top of the rock, and in the twinkling of an eye was in our midst.' Rossel (I. ch. iv. p. 99) gives an account of a woman who on being frightened slipped down from the top of a rock on to the sea-shore, and La Billardiére adds (ch. v. p. 234), this precipice was forty feet high, and that the woman ran away and was soon hidden by the rocks below. Of their nimbleness in another direction West (p. 85) tells how some aborigines 'did' some Europeans: 'A shooting party approached a native camp near the Clyde, and found they had just abandoned their half-cooked opossums and their spears: excepting a small group of wattle bushes, at the distance of ten yards, the ground was free of all but the lofty trees: the travellers immediately scoured this thicket, but on turning round they, in great astonishment, discovered that opossums and spears were all gone. It was the work of a moment, but no traces of the aborigines were to be seen.'"

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Tasmanians

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"They appear to have possessed that extraordinary faculty common to nomadic savages in other parts of the world of making themselves indistinguishable from the surrounding scenery while still perfectly visible. West quotes (p. 86) the following from Ross: 'I remember a fellow of the Grimaldi breed: he undertook on a fine summer's evening, to place himself among the tree stumps [20] of a field, so that not two of a large party should agree as to his identity. He reclined like a Roman on his elbow, projected his arm as if a small branch, and drew down his head. No one could tell which was the living stump, and were obliged to call him to come out and show himself.' This art was no doubt more probably made use of in hunting than in warfare, and the tribe would no doubt be aware of the tactics of the enemy."

"Both the men and women hold themselves very erect; indeed the men, probably from the habit of balancing the spear, throw back the shoulders so much as almost to make it appear a deformity' (Davies). Marion also states that they kept their shoulders back, and Dixon (p. 22) that the 'body was erect and the gait firm and stately.' Bunce's party (p. 55) admired their upright and even elegant gait. La Billardière (II. p. 41) speaks on one occasion of their pace being 'sufficiently slow for us to follow them with ease.'"

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(No date) 1890

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"When they came in contact with the Europeans, their knowledge of the power of climbing did not come amiss, for Mr. Meredith relates (p. 206) that 'a wounded native woman having been shut up for the night in a hut, the latter was visited in the early morning to see how the patient fared; but, though the door had been closed and fastened, the chimney had not and up it the dark lady had gone,' while on an earlier occasion La Billardière (II. pp. 39-40) found himself watched from an unexpected quarter, thus: 'I had not perceived the young girls for some time; ... but, happening to look behind me, I saw, with surprise, seven who had perched themselves on a stout limb of a tree, more than three yards from the ground, whence they attentively watched our slightest movements.'"

"Bad Habits. -- Of one habit among one lot of men La Billardière (II. p. 72) says: 'We were much surprised to see most of them holding the extremity of the prepuce with the left hand, no doubt from a bad habit, for we did not observe anything of the kind among some others who soon afterwards joined them.' This habit [21] may have been common, as Péron gives an illustration of a group in which one man is drawn with the left hand in the position named.

We cannot perhaps close this chapter better than with Count Strzelecki's summary of their motions (p. 336): 'Compared with the negro, he is swifter in his movements, and in his gait more graceful. His agility, adroitness, and flexibility, when running, climbing, or stalking his prey, are more fully displayed; and when beheld in the posture of striking, or throwing his spear, his attitude leaves nothing to be desired in point of manly grace.'"

"Péron seems to have taken considerable trouble to ascertain the true state of the physical powers of the aborigines, and collected, so far as he could, all the details which would in any way tend to throw light on this subject. He records (pp. 235-236) that on one occasion M. Maurouard, one of the midshipmen, on Bruny Island 'had proposed to one amongst them, who seemed the most robust, to wrestle with him; and that the Van Diemen's Lander had accepted the challenge; was several times thrown by the French midddy, and forced to acknowledge his inferiority.' On another occasion, also on Bruny Island, he relates (p. 256): 'It was not long before we encountered two women, who, from the top of a neighbouring hill, were directing their steps towards the sea-shore. [24] ... My companions started to pursue them, but had hardly gone 200 paces when the women, whom they thought easily to overtake, were already out of sight: this I had predicted beforehand, having had several opportunities of convincing myself that the inhabitants of these shores were in general much swifter in running than we were.'"

"We made them presents of a great number of things, which they let us hang round their necks with strings, and soon they were almost covered with them, apparently to their great satisfaction; but they gave us nothing, for they had brought nothing with them. A native, to whom we had just given a hatchet, displayed great dexterity at striking several times following the the same place, thus attempting to imitate one of our sailors, who had cut down a tree. We showed him that he must strike in different places, so as to cut a notch, which he did immediately, and was transported with joy when the tree was felled by his strokes. They were astonished at the quickness with which we sawed the trunk in two; and we made [37] them a present of some hand-saws, which they used with great readiness, as soon as we had shown them the way. [WEL: citing La Billardière, I, 181-211; 1792]."

"A graphic account of the power possessed by these aborigines in tracing the steps both of animals and men is given us by Lloyd (pp. 53-54). He says: 'The aborigines possessed the faculty of tracing the footprints of men and animals to an extraordinary degree. Frequently I have enlisted a sharp-eyed native in search of strayed sheep. . . . By the first gleam of morn we had traversed miles of hills, green forests, and fields. . . . Suddenly, the galvanic exclamation, "Wah! wah!" would imply traces of the wandering sheep--so slight as to be almost invisible even to my practised eye, but so obvious to my aboriginal companion that he could instantly declare the hour of the night or morning on which the impression had been made. Once found, he would follow on their track at a quick-march pace--no matter what description of country the animals might have travelled over--until, lo! to my great joy, there stood the truants, perched on the very summit of some rocky, sugar-loaf-shaped hill, gazing at us as if in perfect astonishment at having been discovered. . . . Such, indeed, was the skill of the natives in tracing footprints, that during the eventful days of Bushranging . . the Government employed several of them as mounted police. In that capacity they were of infinite value. '"

"We have just seen above that in the use of their floats a native swims on each side, holding the float with one hand. Calder says (Journ. p. 23): 'Some of the men, unlike the women, were not always good swimmers, though most of them were perfect.' La Billardiére 'wishing to know whether these islanders were expert swimmers, one of our officers jumped into the water, and dived several times; but it was in vain that he invited them to follow his example. They are very good divers, however, ... for it is by diving that they procure a considerable part of their food' (II. ch. x. pp. 51-52). Later on he was more successful, and thus describes a diving scene: 'Hitherto we had but a faint idea of the pains the women take to procure the food. ... They took each a basket, and were followed by their daughters, who did the same. Getting on the rocks that projected into the sea, they plunged from them to the bottom in search of shell-fish. When they had been down some time, we became very uneasy on their account. ... At length, however, they appeared, and convinced us they were capable of remaining under water twice as long as our ablest divers. An instant was sufficient for them to take breath, and then they dived again. This they did repeatedly till their baskets were nearly full' (II. ch. x. p. 57)."

"Backhouse speaks thus of their diving powers (p. 168): 'Some of the women went into the water... to take crayfish. These women seem quite at home in the water, and frequently immerse their faces to enable them to see objects at the bottom. When they discover the object of their search, they dive, often using the long stems of the kelp, to enable them to reach the bottom.' [165] Backhouse mentions that 'two white men being in danger of drowning on a raft, some of the native women... swam to the raft, and begged the men to get upon their backs, and they would convey them to the shore; but the poor men refused, being overcome with fear' (p. 147); and on another occasion that 'two women waded and swam from Green Island to the Settlement--a distance of three miles' (p. 89). Mr. Meredith mentions that 'a native woman, to avoid being captured, rushed into the sea, where she swam and dived for some time, before she could be induced to come ashore' (p. 205). Davies speaks of the women 'being generally, if not at all times, the divers' (p. 413). With the exception therefore of Calder, no writer speaks of the men as swimmers."